

State regents approve new academic standards

(eCap) The State Regents for Higher Education unanimously approved new English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics standards Thursday morning.

The new standards stem from the passage of House Bill 3399 in 2014, which repealed Common Core standards in ELA and math, and temporarily replacing them with PASS standards until a new set of standards were developed by the Oklahoma Standards Steering Committee.

Chancellor Glen Johnson, who serves as a member of the committee, said that since the bill's passage over a year-and-a-half ago, a lengthy process began to ensure the new standards would be college and career ready. He emphasized the regents' specific scope in establishing and reviewing the new standards as they were drafted was focused on reducing remediation rates and furthering the agency's Complete College America completion goal by providing opportunities to increase post-secondary degree completion.

"The timeframe for this was very limited. We believe the review has been thorough," Johnson said, as he commended all the extensive work of State Department of Education and regents' faculty and its staff.

"We are prepared today to make the recommendation to our regents that these standards that we are presenting drive the issue of college readiness and also serve to reduce remediation and increase completion rates." Johnson said.

Dr. Blake Sonobe, vice president of academic affairs, introduced the co-chairs of the ELA and math writing teams for the standards, Dr. Matt Hollrah and Dr. Stacey Weinand. Hollrah serves as chair of the English department at the University of Central Oklahoma. Weinand is a mathematics teacher at Norman North High School and is the former mathematics director at the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

The writing teams were composed of representatives from common and higher education, and reviewed numerous publications, reports and other states' standards; in addition to consulting experts in the field. They additionally reviewed thousands of comments and suggestions submitted by common and higher education faculty, members of the business community and the general public. Hollrah and Weinand outlined their respective teams' writing processes in composing each of the four drafts of the new standards.

"Higher education faculty was involved in every step of the process, in terms of reviewing the standards," Sonobe said. "Every, single draft was reviewed by members of the math and English faculties from various institutions. The faculty members found that these standards are college and career ready and they will reduce the need for remediation...and they will increase success in post secondary education."

After being approved by the regents, the new ELA and math standards were subsequently approved by the State Board of Education later Thursday morning.

[Editor's note: See related story, State Board of Education approves English, Math academic standards]

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State Board of Education approves English, Math academic standards

(eCap) The Oklahoma State Board of Education gave its unanimous approval Thursday to the newly drafted academic standards

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Quote of the Day

"It's going to take a lot of hard work. We are going to have to make tough decisions. We are going to have to roll up our sleeves. We are going to have to do our homework. And there will certainly be different groups out here that say, 'Don't touch mine...' But it must be done, because it's just not smart to continue doing it the way we've been doing it."

Gov. Mary Fallin

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in English Language Arts and Mathematics.

The new standards came about as the result of the Legislature's rejection of Common Core standards via House Bill 3399 in 2014. The bill set a deadline of 2016 to develop and begin implementation of standards unique to Oklahoma.

In the bill, the Legislature also required a great deal of scrutiny be given to the standards by allowing the public to review the standards and voice their opinion.

State officials say the standards received immense backing and presented the board with over 50 letters of support from various teachers, agencies, consortiums, associations and school districts.

"What's most impressive about these letters is they are all very unique to the organization that sent them. They are recognizing the rigor and recognizing they are vetted and that they are truly Oklahoma standards, high quality standards that will ensure our students are college and career ready," said Deputy Superintendent Cindy Koss.

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, who were tasked with certifying the standards as college and career ready, gave their seal of approval to the standards in a separate but simultaneous meeting Thursday. [Editor's Note: See related story, State regents approve new academic standards]

Koss said that the standards drafting process has been "inclusive, transparent and focused" but admitted that the writing teams have received commentary to the contrary along the way.

State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister also voiced her support for the standards and said they contain rigor, and most of all, are vertically aligned from grade to grade.

"This is a common sense approach where we want to de-clutter and focus very laser-like on what students need to be ready for the next level, whether that be college or a career path," she said. She also pointed out this is the first time Oklahoma has had standards that are fully vertically aligned from Prekindergarten to twelfth grade.

Board members asked how the proposed new standards compare with other states, and specifically how the new standards compare to the Common Core. It was noted that the standards received external reviews from experts in other states.

Hofmeister said one of the great things about the proposed new standards are the accompanying support documents that were designed with the state's increasingly inexperienced teaching force in mind.

"We have around 1,000 teachers who are emergency certified, as well as all of the brand new teachers. We were mindful of that when these were crafted," Hofmeister said. "How you teach them is something that is left to the local districts, but that standard is set. We do believe we need to get out of the way and let teachers teach and we provide support."

Hofmeister also said she "won't rest until we have a high level of support for teachers" who will be implementing the new standards.

The department has a short time frame to get the standards in place if they receive legislative approval.

Hofmeister said standards will be presented to House and Senate members in a joint meeting Monday morning. The Legislature will decide during the 2016 session whether to approve or disapprove the proposed standards, which would be implemented in Oklahoma public schools in time for the start of the 2016-17 school year.

"We have a very short time frame to be able to accomplish the work the districts must do," she said. "With budget cuts, you can imagine that they are stretched already and this is going to be a situation where it's going to be more difficult than ever to accomplish this in such a short time frame."

Also Thursday, the board approved new standards for physical education and health.

[LESS]

Regents look toward future, prepare for session

(eCap) Chairman Toney Stricklin and Chancellor Glenn Johnson summarized the agency's future as the Legislature prepares to reconvene, during Thursday's meeting of the State Regents for Higher Education.

"Today is not a day to be reflective but to look forward," Stricklin said.

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Stricklin said the regents are looking forward to four productive months ahead of them as they prepare for the start of session Monday. He outlined what elements the agency should highlight once session begins and bills that will affect higher education in the state are discussed by both House and Senate members.

"What guides us through this?" Stricklin asked. "Oklahoma higher education is a good news story. We need to make sure that we portray that to the [legislative] leaders that we deal with."

He continued, "The affordability that we have is absolutely outstanding. The fact that our students graduate with very low student debt is something that we need to embrace."

"This is all about our students," Stricklin said. "It's not about the regents. It's not about the chancellor. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about our students and that's what we're going to focus on in this upcoming legislative session."

Johnson echoed Stricklin's sentiments in his report. He spoke on higher education's important place in the face of a potentially historic budget shortfall.

"I think it is important that we focus on one consistent message for higher education: there's not an entity in government that has a better return on investment than higher education," Johnson said.

Johnson said ensuring legislators are aware of the agency's degree completion goals through the Complete College America (CCA) was another important goal for the agency over the coming year in the hopes of minimizing future cuts. He described the numerous efforts being made by universities around the state to save funds.

"This is going to be a year where each one of us can have an impact on the result and we certainly need to do that," Johnson said. "I hope our message is very clear to our governor and our legislature that we are being very proactive in higher education in order to deal with this budget crisis, in way that is not just for this year but in way where we are fine-tuning our business model in order to have a sustainable model going forward."

The regents also named seven Oklahoma high schools as "Oklahoma's Promise 2015 State Champions" at Thursday's meeting. In attendance were representatives from Okmulgee High School, the Class 3A Champion with 24 Oklahoma's Promise graduates, as well as Class B runner-up Leedey High School, with eight Oklahoma's Promise graduates.

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Jolley, Nelson discuss education saving account proposals

(eCap) During a press conference on Thursday, two lawmakers discussed proposed legislation that would implement Education Savings Accounts (ESA), creating personalized accounts for children to attend schools outside of their assigned districts.

Sen. Clark Jolley, R-Oklahoma City, said the bill would allow for parents to customize their child's educational experience, regardless of zip code or financial status.

"We already have school choice in Oklahoma. We have had it since statehood. If you're wealthy enough to move to...a high performance school district of your choice, you can move into that district if you're wealthy enough to afford the house there," he said. "What ESAs really do is it provides, for the first time in state history, the ability to allow for all parents, regardless of their income, to be able to have realistic opportunities."

Both Jolley and Rep. Jason Nelson spoke about the unique, different needs of every child and the inability of one-size-fits all public school system to meet the unique needs of every student.

"Our public school system provides a great benefit to our state and a great benefit to our kids, but it can't be all things to all people," said Nelson, R-Oklahoma City. "What we're talking about is using money....that is being used today to educate a child in a public school somewhere else that better meets their needs."

This lack of a customizable education could be one of the reasons Oklahoma has a low college attainment rate, said Jolley, because "we try to fit everybody into a universal system where everything is the same."

The goal of creating ESAs is to empower and trust parents with the ability to expend dollars that would otherwise go to schools in which their zip code assigns them, said Jolley.

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"We don't really empower parents with the ability to really have a customized education for the customized needs of their unique children, and that's something we seek to change with Education Savings Accounts," he said.

The measure would affect upper and lower middle income parents and those in poverty that are stuck in the district where they reside, said Jolley.

As for opponents of the bill, Jolley said ESAs could help with increased teacher pay by taking advantage of the money left behind by children who choose to leave the school district.

"A lot of people say these ESAs will drain local schools, they won't have any more money," said Jolley. "You'll notice that we leave a significant percentage of the money that the public school district would receive in that same public school district to educate a child that is no longer there."

The funds calculated per child are determined by a weighted system based on things like the need for special education or income levels, he said.

"A lot of people act like it's some crazy, right wing thing," said Nelson.

During The Associated Press' annual legislative forum, Gov. Mary Fallin commented on the issue of ESAs.

"I hope this year the Legislature will send a bill to my desk that I can sign that will allow Oklahoma families and their students the opportunity to have choices in where they go to school and to offer each student the best environment possible for their education," she said. "Students learn differently. They have different needs."

HB2949 by Nelson, creates the Oklahoma Education Savings Account Act and the Oklahoma Education Savings Account Program to provide additional educational options to parents for the education of students by creating education accounts for individual students empowering parents to make educational decisions for their children. It requires education savings accounts be established for individual students beginning with the 2016-2017 school year. The bill defines applicable terms. The bill establishes program enrollment procedures. The bill determines the annual amount to be deposited to the education savings account for the student. The bill requires the State Department of Education to transfer the amount of funds to the State Treasurer for deposit into the education savings account for each eligible student pursuant to a schedule established by the State Board of Education. The bill prohibits eligible private school or a provider of educational services receiving funds from an education savings account to refund any of the money directly to parents of the student. The bill establishes procedures for the disbursement of remaining funds when a student graduates or leaves the program. The bill requires the State Board of Education to establish a process by which the public may notify the board of any violation of the Oklahoma Education Savings Account Act and it creates procedures for suspending a student's participation in the program. The bill provides that acceptance by private schools of students participating in the Education Savings Account Program does not expand the regulatory authority of the state or any school district to impose any additional regulation on private schools. The bill requires the State Board of Education to aside an amount of money from the total amount appropriated for State Aid purposes and any other revenue available for allocation for State Aid purposes to cover expected demand for education savings accounts during the 2016-2017 school year. It requires at the beginning of each subsequent school year that the board set aside 120 percent of the total amount deposited into education savings accounts the previous school year and of the total amount for which applications were received but for which no funds were available, to allow for potential growth in participation. The bill requires the board to promulgate necessary rules. The bill permits the State Board of Education to select an independent research organization, which may be a public or private entity or university, to conduct a study of and report on the academic gains of eligible students participating in the Education Savings Account Program. It sets requirements for the study.

SB0609 by Jolley and Nelson, creates the Oklahoma Education Empowerment Scholarship Act.

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Fallin to propose 'restructuring' budget

(eCap) Gov. Mary Fallin said Thursday she will use her state of the state speech Monday to propose restructuring the state's budget.

"It's going to take a lot of hard work. We are going to have to make tough decisions. We are going to have to roll up our sleeves. We are going to have to do our homework. And there will certainly be different groups out here that say, 'Don't touch mine...' But it must be done, because it's just not smart to continue doing it the way we've been doing it," Fallin told reporters at the

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Associated Press annual legislative forum.

Fallin said the state does not have a revenue problem. Instead, she said, it has a problem with how its revenue is allocated. Sales tax exemptions, Fallin said, take \$8.0 billion out of state coffers, while \$1.7 billion is returned in the form of tax credits and incentives. Another \$1.7 billion is in agency revolving funds.

Plus, she added, there is the money that comes "off-the-top," tax revenue which is dedicated to a particular agency or program and not appropriated by the Legislature. Lawmakers, Fallin explained, get to spend only 45-cents of every tax dollar collected.

"We need fiscal stability in our budgeting system," Fallin said.

Fallin said her preparation of fiscal year 2017's executive budget revealed three options:

- Make no changes in the budget system and cut every agency upwards of 13.5 percent to make up for the \$900.9 million decline in revenue that is forecast;
- Use one-time money, other "mechanisms and tricks" to balance the budget; or
- Restructure the state's budget.

Fallin said her ideas on restructuring the budget will be "very specific" and "look at all our revenue streams and prioritize where our money goes to our core missions of state agencies and that we lay a solid foundation in our state budget for future generations of Oklahomans."

Fallin added, "We have to have a serious conversation in our state to change the long-term strategy of our state budget and state government."

Fallin stopped short of providing further details of her budget plan, saying reporters and the public would have to listen to the speech Monday, the first day of the legislative session.

Fallin said she will call for a teachers' pay raise in her state of the state speech and executive budget. "This year, even with an economic downturn, you will see me offer a proposal for a teachers' pay raise," Fallin said.

Again, the governor would not go into detail about how she would fund the pay increase, saying the details would be outlined Monday. She did say, referring to a proposal supported by several education groups, "It will be based on raising our sales tax."

[LESS]

Fallin taps State Emergency Fund for earthquake monitoring, research

(eCap) Gov. Mary Fallin announced Thursday she has approved the expenditure of nearly \$1.4 million from the State Emergency Fund to bolster the efforts of state regulators and earthquake researchers.

Speaking to reporters at the Associated Press' annual legislative forum, Fallin acknowledged, "We do know that the changes in technology and the different processes that are being used at disposal wells have caused a rise in earthquakes in the state of Oklahoma.

"To address that, I am announcing today that I have directed that we spend \$1.4 million out of our State Emergency Fund to give the Corporation Commission and the Oklahoma Geological Survey more additional tools to help them speed up their process. Even in a budget shortfall, this is a critical subject to homeowners, businesses and to the state of Oklahoma and to our future," Fallin said.

The allocations are based on recommendations from the Corporation Commission and the Coordinating Council on Seismic Activity that Fallin formed a year and a half ago.

"I immediately made arrangements for the Corporation Commission and OGS to receive the money necessary to meet those needs," Fallin said in a press release. "I'm committed to funding seismic research, bringing on line advanced technology and more staff to fully support our regulators as they take meaningful action on earthquakes."

Fallin said the money going to the Corporation Commission will allow the agency to move forward with much-needed computer updates and to hire two contract geologists and other staff to work on seismic issues.

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Corporation Commission Vice Chair Dana Murphy said in the release that the transfer addresses the need for essential resources. "Efficient and timely handling of the huge amount of data involved is critical if we are to respond effectively to the earthquakes," Murphy said. "The governor's prompt action on our request addresses those concerns."

The Oklahoma Geological Survey (OGS) will use its share of the emergency funds to install additional seismic monitoring stations in western Oklahoma, update its monitoring network and upgrade its mapping systems. The research agency also will conduct studies to shed light on how wastewater interacts with the Arbuckle formation, where most disposal wells operate, and the basement layer of rock below it.

OGS Director Jeremy Boak said the additional funding will meet a variety of the agency's needs related to the increase of earthquakes in Oklahoma.

"The funds will enable us to provide better recommendations for remedial action to further reduce the rate and magnitude of induced earthquakes," said Boak.

Fallin said the goal of the allocations is to develop better research and science-based policies that do not harm the state's economy but provide safety to Oklahoma residents.

According to the press release, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission will receive \$387,000 for:

- Information technology upgrades;
- Two contract geologists, contract clerical worker and geophysicist consultant; and
- Senior-level oil and gas attorney.

During his presentation to reporters at the forum, House Speaker Jeff Hickman, R-Fairview, said he believed corporation commissioners should have access to disposal well data in a near-real time electronic format. Presently, he noted, those records are submitted a variety of ways, including in handwritten form and via fax.

Fallin's release said the Oklahoma Geological Survey will receive \$1 million for:

- Installation of additional permanent seismic monitoring stations
- Update seismic monitoring network and software
- Analyze the response of seismicity to regulatory and market forces driving changes in produced water injection;
- Characterize the properties of the Arbuckle formation and basement rock in a complex fluid reservoir; and
- Workshops to share research results and define needs for additional studies.

Hickman noted the survey, which is housed at the University of Oklahoma, currently lacks a seismologist, which he said he believed needed to be hired.

The State Emergency Fund was created primarily to provide matching funds during disasters, but the fund has been used for related purposes as well. Fallin announced Jan. 12 she had approved the transfer of \$1.8 million from the State Emergency Fund so Oklahoma could qualify for federal funds needed to repair flood control structures damaged in 2015.

Fallin said \$9.1 million remains in the fund.

[LESS]

Board of Education grants greater flexibility to school districts

(eCap) The Oklahoma State Board of Education voted Thursday to grant local school districts greater flexibility in how they spend certain appropriated dollars given the state's grim fiscal picture.

The board granted school districts flexibility in how they use nearly \$30 million in state funding previously restricted for meeting the requirements of the Reading Sufficiency Act, ACE remediation, alternative education and staff development.

Those funds had previously been appropriated and distributed to school districts in December, one day before the state's current fiscal year revenue failure was announced. Following the revenue failure declaration, the State Board of Education convened in a

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special meeting to approve mandated midyear cuts of nearly \$47 million to school districts.

State officials said the new flexibility is intended to help districts cope with midyear cuts in state funding for public schools.

"Had we realized that (a revenue failure) would happen we would have held that back and done things a little differently," said Hofmeister. "After additional review, we have come to this solution of providing additional flexibility even though those funds have been distributed ...it is our understanding many have not spent it but it may have already occurred."

Hofmeister told the board the move was a "cutting of strings" and not dollars. Because the Legislature did not provide a line item budget to the department, the board has the authority to change how those previously allocated funds are spent.

"Schools will still be required to provide the services they are required to by law but this would allow schools to spend the money in other areas," said Carolyn Thompson, director of government affairs. "It is in their best and our best interest to have that creative flexibility."

With greater flexibility, school districts may be able to reduce the amount they spend in any of the four areas and use the remaining dollars on something of higher priority.

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